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RR RUEHMR RUEHRN  
DE RUEHSB #0908/01 1991311  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
R 181311Z JUL 06  
FM AMEMBASSY HARARE  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0394  
INFO RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY  
RUEHUJA/AMEMBASSY ABUJA 1276  
RUEHAR/AMEMBASSY ACCRA 1123  
RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA 1280  
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0048  
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0541  
RUEHDK/AMEMBASSY DAKAR 0906  
RUEHKM/AMEMBASSY KAMPALA 1334  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 000908

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AF/S FOR H.SERVIN-BAEZ  
SENIOR AFRICA DIRECTOR C. COURVILLE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/18/2015

TAGS: [ASEC](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ZI](#)

SUBJECT: GEARING UP FOR AUGUST RURAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS

REF: A. REF A: HARARE 764

[1](#)B. REF B: HARARE 610

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher Dell for reasons 1.5 b/d

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (C) Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) chairperson Reginald Matchaba-Hove told the Ambassador July 12 that ZESN was planning to observe the local elections expected to be held August 19. He said there were rumors the elections might be delayed but there had been no official announcement to that effect and he believed they were likely to go ahead as planned, with the possible exception of the mayor's race in Mutare. Matchaba-Hove noted that ruling party succession politics were dividing ZANU-PF, especially in Masvingo province, and would have presented an opportunity for the MDC absent its current division into competing factions. The Ambassador congratulated Matchaba-Hove on his recent award from the National Endowment for Democracy. Matchaba-Hove said he had used his meeting with President Bush to endorse current U.S. policy toward Zimbabwe, including especially continued pressure on the Mugabe regime. End Summary.

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Local Elections Fast Approaching  
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[1](#)2. (C) Matchaba-Hove told the Ambassador that although the government had yet to formally set the date for rural council elections, ZESN believed that they would be held on August [1](#)9. Local Government Minister Chombo had publicly mentioned the date earlier. He said mayoral elections in Chitungwiza, Kadoma, and Mutare and parliamentary by-elections in Chikomba and Rushinga to replace two ruling party MPs who recently passed away were also expected to be held that day.

Matchaba-Hove acknowledged that there were rumors the elections might be delayed but he believed them likely to go ahead with the possible exception of Mutare, where ZANU-PF's unpopularity was such that the GOZ might instead opt for an appointed commission (as in Harare) to run the city rather than risk an embarrassing defeat.

13. (C) Matchaba-Hove said that ZESN expected to field about 100 observers nationwide. Coming off the heels of a successful observation effort in the Budiriro by-election (Ref B), ZESN planned to observe the mayoral and parliamentary elections, as well as a sampling of rural council elections, with a focus on Matabeleland and parts of Masvingo. Training of the observers would commence shortly. The Ambassador asked Matchaba-Hove to keep him apprised of funding and training needs.

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What To Look For In The Elections  
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14. (C) Matchaba-Hove said the ruling party had historically dominated rural council elections, in part due to its superior organization but also due to its ability to manipulate food distribution, media coverage, and the voter rolls in their favor. However, the government and ruling party's unpopularity were so great that in a free and fair national election they would lose badly. Given this national context the opposition could pull some surprises in the local elections, especially in Masvingo province, where divisions in the ruling party had been badly exacerbated by the intra-party struggle to succeed Mugabe. For instance, the recently formed United People's Party (Ref A) was really a

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ZANU-PF splinter and a potential home for Emmerson Mnangagwa should he lose the succession struggle.

15. (C) Matchaba-Hove said the key in Masvingo and elsewhere would be whether the two MDC factions could reach a modus vivendi and not run candidates against each other. In that regard, another key region to watch would be Matabeleland, an MDC stronghold and the Mutambara faction's home turf. The Tsvangirai faction was planning on running candidates in the

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region and its performance would be an interesting indicator of the two factions relative strength in the province. The MDC's divisions could also allow ZANU-PF to win races in Matabeleland. The ruling party actually won seats earlier this year on the Bulawayo city council, the first time that had happened in years.

16. (C) Matchaba-Hove said the MDC stood an even better chance in the three mayoral elections. In Mutare, the suspended MDC mayor had won the last election with over 80 percent of the vote, hence the attraction for the government of appointing a commission instead. However, he said the ruling party was likely to retain the two parliamentary seats up for grabs. Both were rural constituencies that ZANU-PF has dominated politically.

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Democracy Award, Oval Office Visit  
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17. (C) The Ambassador also took the opportunity to congratulate Matchaba-Hove for recently receiving the Democracy Award for the National Endowment for Democracy and to ask about his meeting with the President and other officials in Washington. Matchaba-Hove replied that he was proud to have discussed Zimbabwe with the President. He told the President that the USG's dual pronged approach of isolating the regime, while simultaneously helping the people of Zimbabwe through food and HIV/AIDS assistance was the right approach and that it was working.

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Comment  
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18. (C) A worthy recipient of the Democracy Award, Matchaba-Hove's analysis of the import of the rural council elections is spot on. The fracture within the MDC has captured the headlines but the increasingly visible split within the ruling party is perhaps even more important. The emergence of ZANU-PF splinter parties that carry the ambitions of rivals within the succession battle combined with the abysmal economy presents a real opening for the MDC's two factions. Whether they can take advantage of that opening and post historic wins in rural areas may depend on their ability to mute their mutual hostility and focus their combined efforts on their common enemy. In that regard, Tsvangirai's strong July 13 statement condemning the attack

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on pro-Senate MP Trudy Stevenson, carried in the independent press, was a positive development.

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